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ABSTRACT

Intended for parents of secondary school students with normal reading proficiency, this guide is also useful for teachers in helping such students to develop study skills. The guide provides suggestions parents can use to help their children become more successful readers and describes three types of reading: for specific information, for concentrated study, and for pleasure. It offers tips to determine which type of reading a specific task requires and outlines steps for successful skimming (for specific information) and study (which requires an understanding of the material). The importance of specific study skills and an appropriate study environment are also discussed. (FL)

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JUNIOR-SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND READING:

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP?

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JUNIOR-SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND READING:

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP?

You are already helping. By picking up this paper and reading it you have expressed interest in your son or daughter's education. We know that when schools and parents work together, good things happen. Your desire to help is an important first step in the process of providing an environment of success for the student. How might this desire to help be further translated into action? Well, continue to read, because that is what this paper is all about.

What is reading?

Reading, according to one definition, is the process of acquiring information from text. Well, so what? What does that mean? It means, in part, that we read to gain information. The level of information a person gains from reading depends on a host of factors. Among those factors are: 1) the reason or the purpose for which the reading was done, 2) the ability—or reading level—of the person doing the reading, and finally 3) the experience the reader brings to the reading. Let's look at each of these separately and then see if we can put them all together in order to better understand the task facing the reader.

Purpose for reading. The purpose for reading has an obvious effect on the way a reader approaches whatever reading must be done. For example, if you are looking up the phone number of some business you must contact, your reading is going to be limited to that specific bit of information. You are unlikely to read the entire page of the phone book on which that particular piece of information appears. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the reading you do in order to fill out your income tax forms is likely to be

very detailed, very slow and include a large amount of rereading. One more example at the midpoint of the spectrum might prove useful. If you are reading a novel for your own enjoyment, your reading is likely to be quite different from the fairly brief reading you'd give to the telephone book and nothing like the intense reading and rereading you'd give to the income tax form. It is likely to be fairly quick. You might even skip over some parts that don't hold your interest. Taking shortcuts serves the purpose of reading for enjoyment. You don't have to answer to anyone else for the choices you make. However, the student doing reading assigned in school doesn't have that option, because he or she doesn't determine the purpose. The purpose is dictated from outside.

Unfortunately, many secondary school students don't know the purpose for which much of their reading is done. Thus, parents who want to help their son or daughter to succeed in secondary school might begin by asking the student why the reading is being done. Probe a little. Ask: "Why are you supposed to read chapter 9?" "What are you supposed to get out of it?" If the student doesn't know, have him/her ask the teacher (in a very polite way, of course).

Reading ability. Obviously, the level of ability a person brings to any task has an effect on the success or lack of success s/he has with that task. One of the assumptions of this article is that those students whose skills are extremely low are being helped somewhere else. They are not the focus of concern in this paper. That may not be an accurate assumption, but it is the only one that could reasonably be made, since this article can't legitimately treat the problems of the disabled reader in so short a space. There is one point that should be made, however. If your child is having trouble with the skill of reading, that is, having trouble with reading generally and not just the reading for a particular class, then that person

deserves specific help in reading. That help should be available from your school district. If it isn't, some school district person should be able to tell you where such help is available.

Within the range of what we call normal reading ability there is a great deal of variation. Some people will have more difficulty with their required reading. They will simply have to work a little harder on their reading tasks than some other students. The things discussed in this paper will help, but without the realization that there is work involved, the help will be of minimal effect. For some reason, we readily accept the various levels of ability we see in our daily lives, but find it difficult to accept the fact of varying levels of ability in basic school subjects such as reading. If you are a bowler, you are probably not greatly worried that you have never bowled a 300 game. If you are an amateur musician, you are probably not greatly worried that your playing is not up to the standards set by professionals. But if your son or daughter is among those whose reading ability is average or around average, you might have some trouble accepting that. Thus, another suggestion for the concerned parent is that, if you are certain your child is doing well relative to his/her ability and is working to develop his/her reading skills, then follow the various hints outlined here, but don't worry about it beyond that.

Prior experience. Have you ever picked up a book or an article about a subject with which you have had no prior experience whatsoever? If you have ever had such an experience, you probably found that, although you could read many or all of the words, the information simply didn't get through to you. Think, for example, of reading a short piece on the philosophical implications of Einstein's theory of relativity. Here's a sample quote. "People slowly accustomed themselves to the idea that the physical states of

space itself were the final physical reality." Whatever does that mean? I certainly don't know. I got the quote from a cartoon in the New Yorker. The point is that the reason that we may not understand what it means is that we (those of us who are not physicists, anyway) have no frame of reference in which to place the information. No prior experience.

Your child may face similar problems with some of the material s/he reads in school. S/he may simply not have any appropriate frame of reference in which to place the new information gained from reading. What can you do to help? A suggestion for the concerned parent: When such a case arises, your greater experience may help you to explain the material or allow you to suggest analogies between what the student doesn't know and what s/he does know. Another possibility is to tell the student to seek clarification from the teacher. Most teachers are more than happy to provide such information. The main point to remember is that there is no shame in asking for such clarification. On the contrary, seeking it can often clear up the problem.

The three factors discussed as essential to gaining information from text—purpose, level of skill, and prior experience—are necessary, but really only part of the total process. A further and very important consideration is the kind of reading a person does.

Kinds of reading

Going back to our examples of the reading necessary to finding a phone number, doing our income taxes or reading a novel for pleasure, we can easily see that there are several kinds of reading in which a person might engage. Let's take a closer look at the kinds of reading your child might do.

Study reading. Study reading is the style of reading a student must engage in in order to get the most out of the material s/he is required to read in preparation for class discussions or examinations. This style of

reading is required when the purpose for reading is to gain a great deal of specific information from a textbook. Such reading is, of necessity, slow and very careful. It is best accomplished in this way. The student should get a feel for the material to be read by looking through it from beginning to end in a short (say, thirty seconds per page) time. Tell the student to look for headings and subheadings, important terms in bold faced print or italics, and to read any discussion questions at the end of the chapter or unit. The next step is to read the material at a comfortable rate, noting any terms not understood and noting any problems of understanding. (Suitable conditions and appropriate times for study will be discussed later.) The third step in study reading is to re-examine the parts not understood and find the meanings of mysterious terms. The fourth step is to repeat the first step. Only this time the student should try to re-evaluate his/her own understanding by seeing how well s/he can fill in the blanks suggested by the various headings and subheadings. Let's put those four steps involved in study reading all together.

1. Flip through the material to be read looking for headings and subheadings and bold faced print or italicized terms.
2. Read the material at a comfortable rate.
3. Re-examine difficult areas. Find the meanings of terms not understood.
4. Flip through the material again. Only this time, try to honestly evaluate the information you have gained from the reading by seeing and saying what you know about the various headings and subheadings.

Thus, another activity for the concerned parent is to show your son/daughter the study reading technique outlined here or ask him/her if s/he has been taught any such method at school. There are several different systematic study methods. They are probably equally useful when they are used and used for the right purpose.

Reading for enjoyment. When the purpose for reading is enjoyment, the student should read at whatever rate is most enjoyable for him/her. The main thing for the parent to be aware of is that such reading is very important. For one thing, reading, like any other skill, improves with practice. Secondly, wide reading and a large volume of reading increases vocabulary and broadens the base of experience. Another suggestion for the concerned parent is to encourage your child to do a lot of reading for enjoyment. You can do this by discussing with him/her the books s/he's reading, the books you're reading, having lots of reading materials around the house, and by frequenting the library for the purpose of browsing and/or checking out books.

Information gathering. This refers to the kind of reading one does when, as in our previous example, looking up a phone number. Students do this kind of reading when they are required to find out specific pieces of information such as dates, formulas, lists, etc. This kind of reading requires some pretty specific skills. One must be able to use the table of contents and the index of a book. Then, having found the probable location of the information sought, the skill of skimming must be used to find the information on the specific page or pages. This skill of quick information gathering is best acquired through direct instruction and practice. Another hint for the concerned parent: Find out if your school offers this instruction. If it isn't offered, suggest that it be offered.

The importance of atmosphere for studying

You can make a great contribution to the student's success in secondary school by recognizing the importance of time and place for studying and, to the limit of your resources, providing a good atmosphere for studying.

Study place. In order for study to be really effective, your son/daughter will need a place that is relatively free of distractions. The area where the

TV is or where there is a radio playing is not conducive to effective studying. Quiet is best. The study place need not be fancy or need not be elaborately equipped with desks and lights and such. It does need to have these few things. It needs to be as quiet as possible. It needs to be lighted well enough to avoid eyestrain. And, most important of all, it needs to be recognized by the student and other members of the family as the place where studying is done. So, another hint for the concerned parent is to provide, as well as you are able, a quiet, well-lighted place for study. It should be the same place time after time so that the student comes to recognize it as the place for studying.

Study time. Good, thorough studying is, for most of us, hard work. It should be recognized as such. Just as industry has come to realize that productivity is enhanced by regularly scheduled breaks, educators have come to realize the importance of regularly scheduled breaks in efficient studying. One and one-half to two hours is about the maximum time one can study effectively without a break. Encourage your child to take regular breaks. Furthermore, breaks are most beneficial when the person leaves the area where s/he is studying. Scooting the chair back from the table and snacking is a good break. But a better break is one that is taken without the remaining work staring the student in the face. The student should leave the room. Take a walk. Have a short conversation with someone. Spend a few minutes simply resting the eyes. And yet another suggestion for the concerned parent is that study time should be regularly scheduled and, within that regularly scheduled time, there should be regularly scheduled breaks.

Summary statement

In this brief article an attempt was made to give you, the concerned parent, some idea of what is involved in the process of reading. Eight

specific suggestions about what you can do to help have been offered. It was illustrated that reading isn't just one thing. There are different kinds of reading that are done for different purposes. The degree of success a person has with any reading that is done will be influenced, in part, by the person's ability, the level of experience a person brings to the reading, and, of course, the purpose for which the reading is done. It was also suggested that time and place have an effect on success. Here are shortened versions of the eight suggestions that were made.

1. Be sure the student is aware of the purpose for which the reading is done.
2. Be certain the student is working to the best of his/her ability and let it go at that.
3. Be certain that the person has the necessary frame of reference (experience) to understand what is being read.
4. Help your child to use a systematic study approach.
5. Encourage reading for enjoyment.
6. Make certain the student has or has had a chance to acquire the skills of skimming and scanning in order to help him/her in information gathering.
7. Provide a study place.
8. Schedule study time on a regular basis with regular breaks.

As stated in the opening paragraph, you have already done the most important thing you can do in your attempt to help your son or daughter: You have shown that you care, that you are a concerned parent.